



Sep Yama:

“Ground you cannot see” Finding Country (a primer)

Don't Come Gallery, Melbourne, 30 April - 6 May 2009 &
Sling Exhibition, Brisbane, 25 June 2009

Co-curators: Kevin O'Brien and Michael Markham

Contributors: Gina Levenspiel, Peter Steudle, Eugene Nemisi, Claire Humphreys

Review by Carroll Go-Sam

Sep Yama / Finding Country (a primer) – a foundation exercise in resurging insights into rights in country¹ pursued provocative expressions of Indigenous place as resistance in order to catalyse an audience response. *Sep Yama* reinstates rival notions of occupation and geography as a means of reordering what has been colonised. The first instalment, labelled “a primer”, the culmination of many streams of activity over a period of time, comprised two separate exhibitions, one at Don't Come Gallery, Melbourne, the second at Sling Bar, Brisbane. The exhibits were a composite of disparate elements and endeavours, that were by no means seamless or easily comprehended, and demanded considerable decryption. A number of ancillary elements added to the conceptual and semantic explorations of Finding Country, including a catalogue, a film relay of skaters, image projections, and a series of colourful skateboards painted in traditional Meriam Mer abstract motifs.

Sep Yama is both process and exhibit, encapsulating pan-Indigenous and non-Indigenous constructs of place. Unlike the exclusivity of Indigenous custodial tenure, its extended process and realisation is clearly inclusive of non-Indigenous place-making. It is also a way of thinking that links human activity with the natural world in pursuit of pan-sacred notions of Country.² As an exhibit, *Sep Yama* did not seek to invoke traditional Indigenous concepts of Country but borrowed linguistic etymology and cultural constructs to alter perceptions of place. It was neither distinctly Indigenous nor non-Indigenous, but co-existing. The ground zero of *Sep Yama* consists of select sites within the city of Brisbane, the contested country of the Yagera, Jagera, Turrbal, Ugarupul and Kurnpal peoples.

1. O'Brien conceives Country as a “pre-settlement space” (http://www.finding-country.com/tUG_lightbox/index.html): “Country is an Aboriginal Idea. It is an Idea that binds groupings of Aboriginal people to the place of their ancestors, past, present and future. It understands that every moment of the land, sea and sky, its particles, its prospects and its prompts, enables life. It is revealed over time by camping in it and guides my way into architecture” (Kevin O'Brien, <https://www.lib.uts.edu.au/about-uts-library/news-and-communication/markets-forum/2010/forum-35>).

2. Also expressed in other related works through amorphous poetic constructs concerning architecture and place, see *Architectural Review (Australia)*, 2009: 103, 92-98.





Co-curators O'Brien and Markham extended their curatorial role to that of contributors, propositioning their collaborators to devise an intervention within a designated zone, to contrive their own fragment of the city (for only half the current population), and to expropriate its redundant structure and artefacts. The exercise was alluring since it countered models of development and speculation premised on the inevitable growth of the future city. Could this disrupted urban state give rise to new theoretical or imaginary propositions, along with new processes of reconstructing urban space?³

The 19 intervention schemes produced by the collaborators represent a hybrid of orthogonal, radial and organic systems of city planning models. In the exhibit, each intervention was restricted to its designated zone on a single A4 sheet, identified by map coordinates: hence, B19 is a combination of vertical [A-J] and horizontal [01-38] reference points. On completion, each intervention was slotted into its grid location to form the composite of the final large-scale exhibition panel – an alternative city redesigned by a diverse group. The organising model for each endeavour was constrained within the boundaries of its coordinates, with propositions ending abruptly at the limit. This assemblage emphasised contrasting strategies between adjoining sub-panels, and between new and existing morphologies. In the process, the known city was reconfigured beyond recognition.

The consequence is an anti-city, fragmented, disintegrated and disrupted, where neighbouring themes suddenly change, yet some continuity occurs between major geographic and morphological features. If the viewer focused on the individual unit and its contextual neighbours, however, any expectations of unified constancy of city planning have already been radically undermined. Dismantling and interrupting the prevailing order, the chaotic intention is further heightened by the clustering and scattering of individual themes across the city. Memories of the displacement of the 'organic nature' of Indigenous settlement planning arise, yet in reverse – the orthogonal grid structure is subverted by revisionist inconsistent utopias.

Sep Yama not only infuses the city with tension (indeed, tension seems too polite a descriptive) – the reordered morphology brazenly usurps existing systems and provides new directions, which seem difficult to conceive at first glance. Some propositions are decipherable, others are esoteric and impenetrable. The city and its architecture are severed: viewers are made to consider them as separate dimensions. Architecture is only contemplated for its operational or classificatory use, not its value as an artefact.

There are discrepancies between exhibition and catalogue: in the latter, a single graphic depicts the completed plan, supported by text explaining this exercise of interrogating the city. At the exhibition, the point was lost somewhat, due to a lack of translation. The viewer was left appreciating the aesthetic quality and collective power of the composition, solely, as *objet d'art*. In the exhibition catalogue, each of the interventions is given equal status, highlighting the egalitarian premise that *Sep Yama* is a medium inviting free exploration. Contradicting this inclusivity, though, is the considerable editing of the image content; there is a disparity between the final composite details and those represented in the catalogue. It suggests that a particular graphic product was given preference over specific themes or propositions. The tension and unevenness of the composite panel at the

3. For instance, lower density lends itself to a reduction in built fabric, allowing the exposure of an imagined morphology and devising of an alternate typology. Yet the density of the reconfigured patchwork city is surprising. Also, it is difficult to determine whether emphasis was placed here on the process prescribed or the significance of the state arrived at. Once arrived at the fragmentary final condition, does the conceptual achievement then have any attributes worthy of implementation? And, does *Sep Yama* advance a generative framework for place-making by melding pan-Indigenous concepts of place with the dominating hierarchy of the city's morphology?



exhibition was perhaps a consequence of its procurement, where communication of intent and resolution had been achieved through surprisingly unrelated streams of undertakings that were by no means completely consolidated.

Sep Yama proposed multi-hued readings of objects, event and actions. Next to the panel, the project attempted to orchestrate meaning into painted skateboards, footage of skaters in abandoned swimming pools and image projections. These elements were then tied to compositions of digital statements about Indigenous dispossession and oppression. But these were implicit not explicit. The painted skate decks were displayed like Indigenous fighting shields, scarified after their use in empty pools: implements of a ritualised settling of dispute. Their inclusion stresses that this dispute has not achieved reconciliation. It is ongoing and unresolved.

The disenfranchisement of skaters from free access to pedestrian space (and their subsequent anonymous claim of useless spaces) subliminally corresponds to the historical exclusion of the Indigenous from the city heart. To imbue power into the mundane, the observer had to leap to an alignment in thinking through an altered perception which registered the correlation between the skaters (who are regulated not as a consequence of race, but recreational choice) and Brisbane's apartheid, or Indigenous oppression. This link, forged by the exhibition's choice of media and communication, was a little too vague, which partially diminished the overall strengths of *Sep Yama's* assertions. A different editing of the documentary film might have added to the impact of the message.

The general tension exuding from the wall-mounted composite culminated in an assault on the monumental and historical artefacts of the city through three sites of projection. Borrowing from the technique of the guerrilla street art movement, of throwing images onto buildings, the projections expanded on under-explored Indigenous resistance themes. Indigenous people, once the 'dominant culture' in Australia, became subordinated and displaced through traumatic events, by destructive technologies of warfare and suppressive legislation. In this exhibition, visual media technologies acted to subvert commonly-held views of place. Care-

fully-edited images, in particular one image repeatedly appliquéd on known sites of usage by traditional owners, sat uncomfortably against the projection screens of the 'Gabba' (the Brisbane Cricket Ground), the Gallery of Modern Art and the infamous Windmill Tower – all Brisbane landmarks. Each of these three sites had diverse uses that resonate in contemporary Indigenous knowledge: one sacred, another economic and the third destructive (e.g., an early site for hanging Aboriginal frontier guerrilla fighters). The fleeting presence of each projection and the repetitive use of one image reinforced the contrast between the presumed ephemeral nature of Aboriginal existence and the city's monuments to permanence.

Finally, *Sep Yama / Finding Country* was defined by what it was not. It was not an enactment of longing for an idealised, imagined place of the past, since destroyed by dispossession and trauma. It did not seek to uncover or reveal a strength inherent in contemporary notions of place and country that sustain Indigenous identity. In many ways, *Sep Yama* was even tangential and alien to known Indigenous constructions of place. Yet, through its imagery, projection and curatorial processes the exhibition exposed prior occupation through the overlay of several thematic explorations. Rather than a sentimental return to the past, *Sep Yama* was a prompter, to push those living in the present to remember that the city of today must be vigorously interrogated, and that it is the culmination of earlier historical displacements.

